

The Wharf at Suffolk 1886

On the Waterfront

A month or so ago I was speaking to a group and when I asked them to name Suffolk's two rivers, some participants (but not all!) knew the Nansemond. Most couldn't name another. My answer was the Blackwater River. Thomas Hazelwood, Commissioner of Revenue and a waterman by blood if no longer by vocation, answered, the James River. Both rivers, along with, of course, the Nansemond River, shaped our history. The James skims along the northern most edge of Suffolk while the Blackwater forms our western boundary with Southampton County and the Nansemond River runs through the middle of what we now call Suffolk. SFW

The river was life for the early residents of Nansemond County – first for the Native Americans, then for the European settlers, the river was a highway, a supply route, a food source, and sometimes a battleground. Early homes were built along the rivers – and the great creeks that fed those rivers – for convenience. To many people the rivers are most important today for the beauty and pleasure they afford.

The name Nansemond (Nansimum on very early maps) comes from an Indian word, which means fishing point. In the 1600's, Lord Matrevers, son of the Duke of Norfolk, was given a grant of over 30,000 acres on the Nansemond River. He tried to change the river's name to Matrevers but apparently no one else liked the idea (from Suffolk: A Pictorial History by Hobbs and Pacquette).

Early in our history the major product moved by river was tobacco. Before long, though, lumber and naval stores – tar, pitch, and turpentine – were major exports. Early in the 20th century farm produce was still carried to market by boat particularly from areas such as Milners, Exit, and Everets on the Western Branch of the Nansemond. Products from Suffolk were taken to larger markets this way as well.

Working on the River



River View

The area of old Suffolk known today as Riverview was once B. B. Dumville's farm which was itself called River View. This house stood on the rise above the Nansemond River where Nansemond Pointe Rehabilitation and Healthcare Center stands today. The pond in the foreground is still in front of Nansemond Pointe.

B. B. Dumville was from Newburgh, New York. He came to Suffolk during Reconstruction and served as Postmaster for several years. He bought the large piece of waterfront land, which he farmed. At low tide on the river one can still see pilings from a wharf that he might have used to ship produce. According to The Virginia State Gazetteer of 1897-98 Dumville also operated a meat market or butcher's shop.

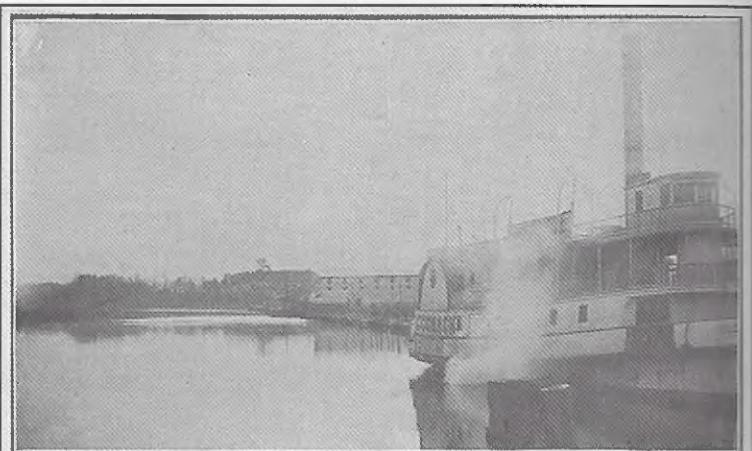
Dumville Avenue was named for him, as was Dumville Lane, which runs off Church Street and probably once ran to the house seen above.

Margaret King Terry, great-granddaughter of B. B. Dumville, gave this picture to SNHS.



Residence of B. B. Dumville, River View, Suffolk, VA

"About 1855 a packet boat was operated between Suffolk and Baltimore. After the Civil War lumber and produce of truck farms were shipped to such an extent that the river seemed to be covered with boats. This activity created much employment as all these vessels had to be provisioned. Often there were as many as twenty-five ships at a time loading and unloading, arriving or departing New York, Philadelphia, or Baltimore. Square-rigged schooners came up river for a cargo of oysters or cypress shingles. One of the most important in-coming products prior to 1890 was ice, cut in Maine ice-fields and shipped down by schooner. ...By 1888 Suffolk was to grow to the second largest port in Virginia in point of tonnage." From History of Suffolk and Nansemond County, Virginia edited by Ann H. Burton



OLD DOMINION STEAMBOAT LANDING

According to a mid century edition of the Suffolk News Herald, the steamboats that ran in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries generally carried freight more than passengers. They were used for passengers for excursions such as Sunday school trips to Ocean View, the popular beach of the time.

The late Dr. L.C. Holland, as a boy, assisted his father in selling refreshments on the excursions. He was quoted as saying all usually went well until the boats encountered the choppy waters of the Chesapeake Bay. Then the landlubbers had trouble.

"Between 1820 and 1840 Philadelphia shipped 4,062 separate pieces of cabinet ware to Suffolk, second only to Charleston. It is not known why this volume arrived in Suffolk as opposed to Norfolk, Portsmouth, Richmond, or Petersburg, though Suffolk would have been a favorable location for the transshipment of this furniture into interior North Carolina."

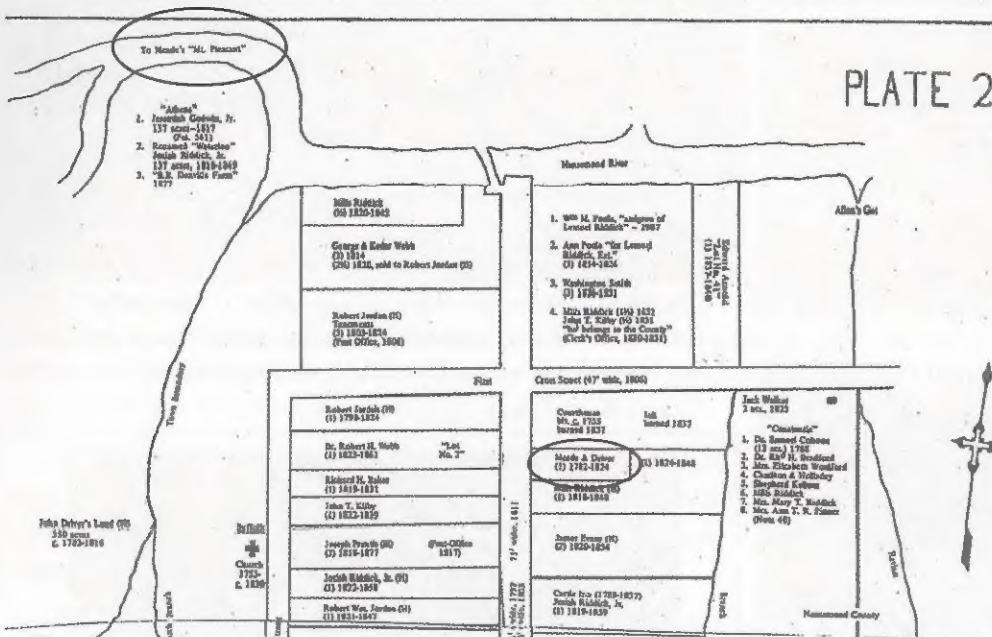
From Classical Norfolk Furniture 1810-1840 by Newbern and Melchor.

The Meade Family on the River

We have so often mentioned the Meade family of 18th century Suffolk and Nansemond County. They were the family for whom Lake Meade was named. Their plantation, Mount Pleasant, was up the river from Suffolk where the neighborhood known as Westhaven Lakes is today.

We read that the Meades settled that site long before the Revolution. At that time, the Smith's Creek (at the head of the river) was wide enough and deep enough for large vessels to go the Meade plantation so that they could carry on direct foreign trade. Andrew

Meade carried on trade with his sloop Molly.



This is a portion of the map of 1795-1837 Suffolk by the late Fillmore Norfleet. It appears in Suffolk in Virginia: A Record of Lots, Lives, and Likenesses. Used with permission

Col. Andrew Meade led the movement to build a church in Suffolk after the town was chartered in 1742. The church would eventually be built on present day Western Avenue behind the modern-day post office site. (That's how Church Street got its name) The Meades (like others) must have come by boat from their home along the river and into Church Creek (where the deep ravine is today) to attend services.

There is much more to be said about the Meades, a family whose name has disappeared from Suffolk except in place names. Look for a Meade feature in a future issue. *Information thanks to Tracie Pruden, a Meade descendant and SNHS member.*



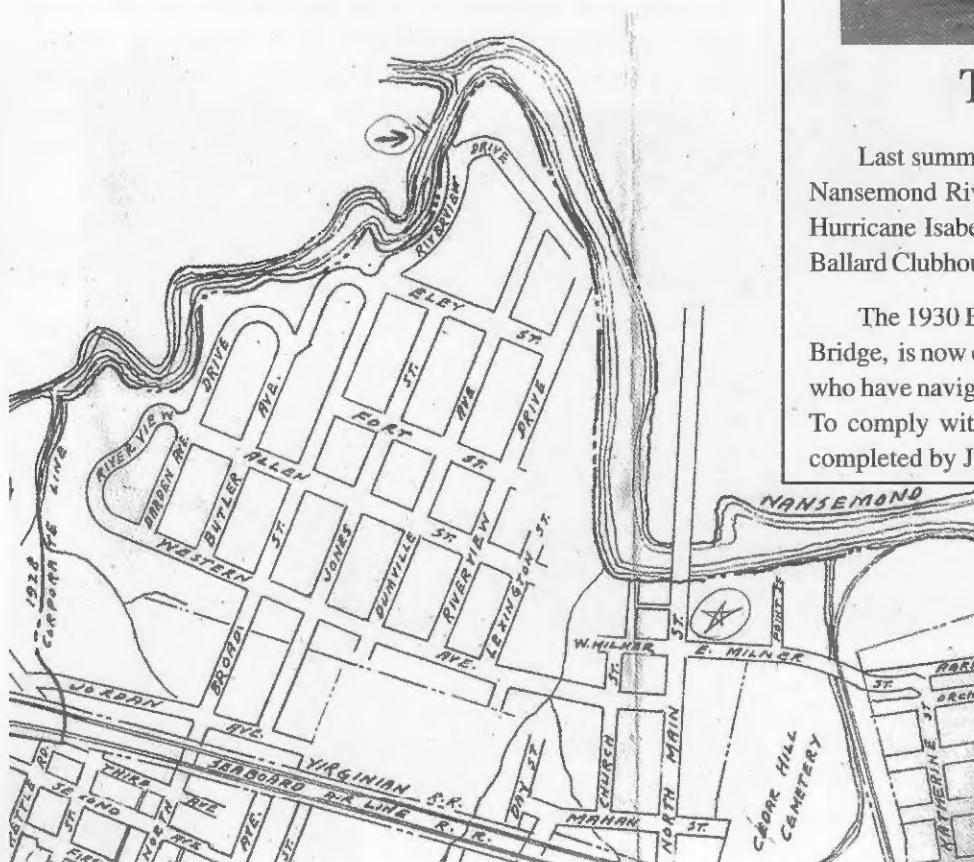
Above, this drawbridge (built in 1925) used to be the entrance to Suffolk from all points north. The bridge shown here in the 1940's was named for Robert W. Withers (1876-1912) a Suffolk native who was considered the father of the highway system in Virginia. He served in the general assembly in the first decade of the twentieth century. This bridge was replaced in 1987 by the bridge we use today. By the way, the plaque naming the old bridge for Robert W. Withers was taken off the old bridge and put on the present one at its completion.



At right, Robert W. Withers

Laurel Cliff Country Club

We wrote about the Laurel Cliff Country Club in our Riverview issue of November 2002 (available at the Train Station). The Club, which closed in 1928, was on a high piece of ground between Smith's Creek and Cohoon's Creek, which came together to form the Nansemond River. All this was before Lake Meade was formed, changing the map and making an island. The formation of the lake cut off river access to many waterfront houses in Riverview as well.



Milner's Town

An old Suffolk family has in its possession a book entitled Laws of the United States 1790 and on the fly leaf is the inscription "Surveyor's Office. Port of Suffolk."

Milner was the name of the early surveyor of the town of Suffolk.

In the early days, as one came up the hill from the river, the first street to cross Main Street was First Cross Street. Eventually First Cross Street became Milner Street (now Constance Road).

Milner or Milner's Town was also the name of a busy port and/or trading center on the Western Branch of the Nansemond River. Farm produce was sent out and manufactured goods were brought in making the merchants wealthy. In November 1780, 250 British soldiers marched in and burned the town. An effort was made to revive the town but it was unsuccessful. Russell's Point is there today.



The Comeback Kid

Last summer we wrote about Nix's Club, which stood in the Nansemond River near the Godwin Bridge prior to being hit by Hurricane Isabel in 2003. In that same article we mentioned the Ballard Clubhouse, which had been destroyed by the storm as well.

The 1930 Ballard Clubhouse on the other side of the Godwin Bridge, is now owned by Drexel Bradshaw and Maxann Morrison who have navigated a sea of red tape in order to rebuild the house. To comply with the state regulations the clubhouse had to be completed by June 30.

At left: This portion of a 1940 map of Suffolk shows Riverview before the dam was constructed to form Lake Meade. The arrow indicates the location of the bridge to Laurel Cliff Country Club.

The star in the circle on the map indicates the location of the new hotel at the site of John Constant's eighteenth century wharf. Milner Street, named for the early surveyor of Suffolk, was eventually extended to become Constance Road, our first bypass.

The Blackwater River



The Blackwater River connected western Nansemond County with the Albemarle region in North Carolina. At the North Carolina-Virginia border the Blackwater and the Nottoway Rivers join to form the Chowan River, which flows to the Albemarle Sound at Edenton. South Quay (pronounced Key) was an important port on the Blackwater in the Revolutionary War and the Civil War.

After the first railroad in the area crossed the Blackwater at Franklin in the 1830's, steam boat service soon connected the Albemarle region with that railroad. Later tug boats carried barges loaded with North Carolina pine up the Blackwater to the Camp Manufacturing Company at Franklin.

South Quay on the Blackwater River

South Quay is mentioned early in history when Col John Blake in 1673-74 was granted 3,000 acres of land "at a place called 'Wickham' hard by South Key [sic]." Any ship that could enter Ocracoke Inlet could get to South Quay. This was soon a trading center with warehouses for tobacco and other goods.

By the time of the Revolutionary War, South Quay was ready to become one of the most strategic points in Virginia. In 1776 it had become a port for importation of foreign trade and had a custom house. There was a shipyard constructing ocean going vessels. The warehouses were built for tobacco but were useful for other goods as well. In 1778 an army quarter master's depot was established with wagon trains carrying supplies to Suffolk and beyond.

South Quay was a help to the American forces and such a problem to the British that in July 1781 the British dispatched 700 men to South Quay. The town was burned July 16. It was rebuilt and played a role in the War of 1812 and the War Between the States, but was never quite the same again. In fact, no village exists at South Quay today.

Information from c. 1930 history of Suffolk and Nansemond County by W.E. MacClenny

The Creeks

Bennetts Creek, Chuckatuck Creek, and Somerton Creek, along with the rivers, played a large role in our early history. There were settlements at Somerton and Chuckatuck when George Fox, the Quaker, came to Nansemond County in 1672. Richard Bennett who would be a colonial governor of Virginia received a large land grant in 1635 that included the creek that would be named for him.

The creeks have changed with almost 400 years of cultivation of land along their shores. As silting has occurred they have become shallower.

The Chuckatuck Creek empties into the James River and Bennetts Creek empties into the Nansemond River near its confluence with the mighty James. The Somerton Creek makes its way to the Chowan River in North Carolina.

The J.Q. Adams, the Stanley, and the Clayton (barely visible at lower left), shown on Chuckatuck Creek c. 1920, belonged to Johnny Adams and his brother-in-law, Sidney Hazelwood. In 1907 they went into business taking tourists to the Jamestown Exposition in Norfolk. Perhaps it was a lucrative business and/or a pleasant diversion from oystering. Whatever the reason, they continued to use the boats after 1907 to carry freight and foot passengers to Newport News and Norfolk. This service was rendered obsolete when the state then constructed the James River Bridge system in 1928. Information thanks to Thomas Hazelwood



Mailbag

Jim McLemore shared with us an email from his cousin Ann Coulbourn Lunsford. Mrs. Lunsford has graciously agreed to allow us to share it with our readers. The Coulbourn family had lumber interests in several places, including Suffolk and Windsor, North Carolina. While the recollections printed here are about shipping from Windsor, N.C., the same method of shipping was practiced in Suffolk well into the 20th century. See our November 2001 newsletter about the Coulbourns.



**Montgomery Lumber Co. 1915
Loading Lumber at Suffolk.**

to get clean. They would bathe in the rivers and the bay. The trip from Windsor to Philadelphia took three days. It was cheaper to ship the lumber to Philadelphia by ship than by rail, because the railroads had discriminatory rates dating back to the post-Civil War era. They punished the South by charging more to ship from south to north than from north to south.

After Coulbourn Lumber Company stopped shipping lumber by schooner, the EE Holland was sold to a company in the Elizabeth City, NC area. They used it for hauling piling. (They were possibly the ones that built the bridge in Elizabeth City.) While the piling company owned the EE Holland, it ran aground in Elizabeth City on a mud flat where it stayed. For years to come, it could be viewed by car to the left of the Elizabeth City Bridge heading from Windsor to Nags Head. Copyright Ann Coulbourn Lunsford

SNHS note—One cannot help but wonder why a boat working out of Windsor, N.C. was named for a well known Suffolk politician.

From Pollock's Sketch Book of Suffolk, Va. 1886

During the war with England in 1812, great uneasiness was felt by the inhabitants of Suffolk lest the British should send small boats up the river from their ships and burn the Town again. In the midst of their fears and suspense, and while an old itinerant preacher named Theophilus Gates was holding a revival meeting at the old church, the alarm came one night that the enemy's barges were coming up the stream and would soon reach the wharves. A panic seized the whole community and Brother Gates's meeting was brought to an abrupt conclusion. The people fled in all directions and general consternation prevailed. In a few hours, however, it was ascertained to be a false alarm, based upon the fact that a few oyster boats were bringing up a supply of bivalves to the popular establishment of Jack Walker, a colored restaurateur, the fame of whose excellent oysters and ginger cakes had secured for him a lucrative business throughout the surrounding country. (see Jack Walker's lot on c. 1795-1837 Norfleet Map of Suffolk this issue)

DAWSON HOUSE NEWS



Contributions since last listed:

SPECIAL GIFTS

Suffolk Rotary Club

A Table for the Dawson House from Mr. & Mrs. Hubert Young

MEMORIALS

For The Dawson House Project

In Memory of Horace P. McNeal

by Mr. and Mrs. Horace B. Phillips, II

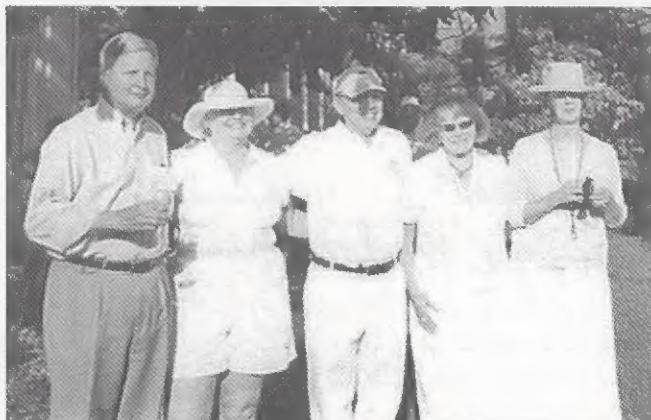
In Memory of Ann Powell

A lamp from Suffolk Book Club and Brandon House Furniture

May Events at the Dawson House

Congratulations to the Sister Cities team and the Cedar Point team who tied for first place in the Dawson House Croquet tournament. Thanks to John Norcross, croquet chairman; Nita Bagnell, Mary Lawrence Harrell, and Pearl Harrell, party planners; the many members who donated food and drink; Nancy and Sandy Dempsey who supplied the tent; the players and the spectators who came to cheer them on.

The English garden tea party held the same weekend was beautiful and well attended. Our thanks to Sue Draper, tea party chairman; Connie Lue, the Tea Lady of Virginia; Katie West, flutist; those who prepared food; and our servers and our guests. Proceeds from both events are for the Dawson House renovation.



Above left, the Dawson House team: Steve Herbert, Marie Haas, Jeff Johnson, Sugar Barrow, and Sally Herbert (absent from photo-Donnie Goldberg).

Above right, the party planners Nita Bagnell, Pearl Harrell, and Mary Lawrence Harrell.

Important Numbers

Train Station: 923-4750

Dawson House 539-2781

New Train Station Website: www.suffolktrainstation.org

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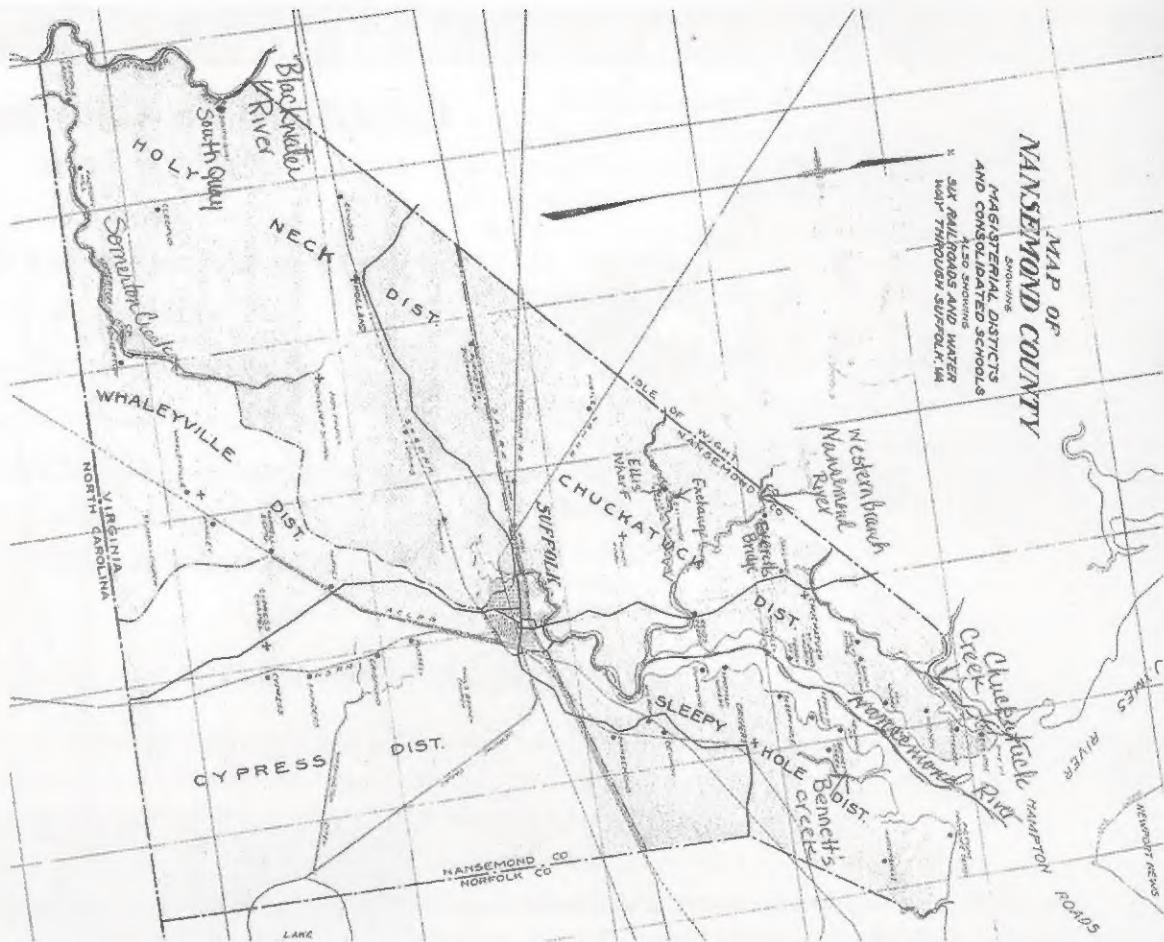
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Birdsong Peanuts, A Div. of
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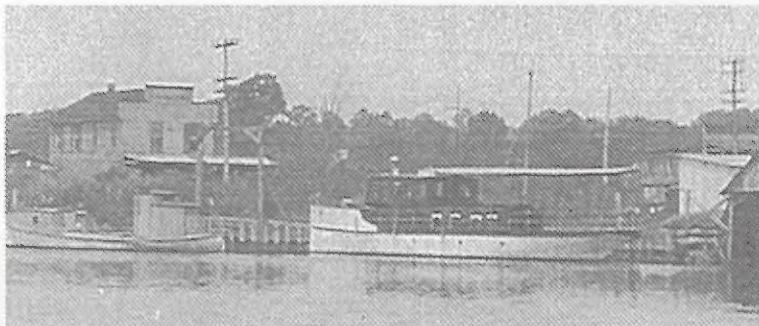
The Blair Bros., Inc.
Nansemond Tractor, Inc.

This 1928 map is representative of the slogan used by the Suffolk Chamber of Commerce in the early 1900's - "SIX RAILROADS AND DEEP WATER to the Sea".



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Obici yacht on the Nansemond River at Suffolk c. 1930?